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ISAAC BONAPARTE BELL.

In the passing of Isaac Bonaparte Bell, one of the leading citizens of Lunenburg County, and the recognized Nestor of its Bar, there was removed from the scenes of his earthly activities a notable, unique figure of Southside Virginia. His death occurred at the home of his son, Walton E. Bell, at Wilburn, Virginia, July 23, 1919. He was approaching his seventy-second birthday, having been born August 7, 1849. He was a native son of Lunenburg and resided in the County all his life.

On his mother's side he was descended from John Williamson and Rebecca Chamberlayne. John Williamson was elected a Vestryman of Curles Church on James River, June 17, 1735. He died in 1757. His son, Cuthbert Williamson, married Susannah White, a daughter of William White, and their daughter Martha Williamson married John Roach. Anne Roach, a daughter of this couple, married Stephen Davis (b. 1795—d. 1866) and their daughter, Susan Frances Williamson Davis, was the mother of Isaac Bonaparte Bell. Stephen Davis, her father, was the son of Nicholas and Lucy Davis of Prince Edward County, Virginia. Nicholas Davis (b. cir. 1750—d. 1818) was a First Lieutenant of Prince Edward County Militia in the Revolutionary War.

On his father's side he was descended from the Calhoun family which gave to the South its great Statesman, Champion and States Rights Advocate, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina. His father was John Davis Bell (b. June 19, 1810—d. Dec. 21, 1891), son of David Bell (b. Feb. 3, 1779—d. Nov. 15, 1836) and Elizabeth C. Davis (b. July 18, 1776—d. August 16, 1852). Elizabeth C. Davis was a sister of Stephen Davis who married Anne Roach. John Davis Bell and Susan Frances Williamson Davis, his wife, were therefore first cousins. David Bell was one of the children of George Bell (b. Jan. 3, 1740—d. 1816) and Rebecca Calhoun (b. 1753—d. 1822) who were married in 1773. Rebecca Calhoun was the daughter of Adam Calhoun (d. 1796) who was of the same family as the Statesman and Patriot, John Caldwell Calhoun.

Both the Bells and the Calhouns were Scotch-Irish Emigrants to this Country, coming from Donegal, Ireland.

The subject of this sketch had few educational advantages. He was about fourteen years old when the Civil War broke out, and all the schooling he ever had he acquired prior to that event. This consisted of a few terms of such "old field" public schools as were afforded in Virginia at that date.

As his two older brothers, David Thomas and Frank Nathaniel Bell, were in the military service, and as he was scarcely old enough for such service, it fell to his lot to stay at home during the earlier part of the war. However, upon attaining the age of sixteen he joined the military forces and became a member of the Company commanded by Captain William Henry Stokes, in the First Regiment of Virginia Reserves, and saw service around Lynchburg, near Richmond and in Petersburg at the time of the evacuation.

After the war, in the midst of the poverty common to all the people of Southside Virginia, he began working on his father's farm and making wagon trips to Petersburg to haul supplies, and gradually this activity occupied most of his time to the exclusion of the farm work, and continued for quite a period. In later years he took great pleasure in recounting his experiences as a "wagoner."

During early manhood he occupied various public offices, including constable, collector, assessor and supervisor, under the old township system. When this system was abolished the County was divided into two districts, and he was elected Commissioner of the Revenue for the lower district, which office he filled for twelve years, declining re-election on account of the exactions of other business interests.

On the 13th day of November, 1885, he was licensed to practice law. The circumstances of his admission to the Bar were unusual. His determination so to do was largely formed upon the advice of Judge F. D. Irvin at that time Judge of the Third Circuit of Virginia.

On account of the precipitate removal from Lunenburg of one of its leading attorneys of that day, there was a real opportunity for a new and capable man. Judge Irvin sent for Mr.

Bell, advised him to be admitted to the Bar and begin at once the practice of the law. He examined him and finding him qualified, wrote out with his own hand upon a piece of parchment eight by twelve inches his license on the 13th day of November, 1885,—a few days later he appeared before Judge Beverly A. Hancock of the Second Circuit of Virginia, who also examined the applicant, and affixed his signature along with Judge Irvin's to the license. Soon after being admitted to the Bar he formed a partnership with that scholarly gentleman, Hon. Robert Turnbull of Lawrenceville, under the firm name of Turnbull and Bell, which partnership continued until a few years ago, when Mr. Turnbull retired from the active practice of the law. For about two years, from 1902 to 1904, Mr. Bell's second son, Landon C. Bell, was a member of this firm under the style of Turnbull, Bell and Bell.

Upon being admitted to the Bar he rapidly rose in his profession. He enjoyed the very highest confidence and esteem of the bench and Bar of Lunenburg and of the many other counties in which he was active in the practice of the law.

After Mr. Bell was admitted to the Bar, he never sought or held public office, feeling that his greatest service could be performed in a private capacity as a general practitioner. He was often urged to seek political or official honors but he even declined them when they came to him unsought, as when in 1912 he was appointed Commonwealth's Attorney by Judge William R. Barksdale to succeed W. E. Neblett who died during the term of office, he declined to accept the appointment.

While he ever felt a serious lack of schooling yet he was remarkably self-educated. His learning was varied and extensive. His knowledge of the Bible was indeed profound. His legal ability was by common consent recognized to be of the highest order, and his knowledge of the interesting, curious and unique things of literature and science was broad and extensive.

While he could claim no college or university as Alma Mater, yet he could claim all learning as his field; his mind absorbed useful information from every source, and grew with the growing evolution of thought and progress about him.

It is often said that there are no geniuses in the legal profes-

sion; that young men of genius go to the front in all other professions except the law. He would scarcely have been picked to illustrate the accuracy of this observation, for while he came to the Bar not very early in life (he was thirty-nine when licensed to practice law), yet when he entered the profession he stepped at once into the front rank and ever remained there.

In one respect lawyers are unfortunate. The circumstances under which they do their greatest work, are usually such as to make possible no lasting memorial of their ability or attainments. The reputations of lawyers are therefore temporary and transient. With half the ability, skill, industry and vision, an artist or a literary character produces a work which may keep before the world his name for an indefinite time, but with lawyers,

“Their great work, as it were, is written on the sands, and their names pass away like shadows.”

In this respect lawyers are even less fortunate than judges, for most judges live in their opinions while the great arguments of counsel, that guided the judges, and enabled them to mould their opinions into enduring monuments are soon forgotten.

These things, true of lawyers generally, are peculiarly true of the subject of this sketch. Few possessed his intensity of application and the disposition to sacrifice every personal convenience and physical enjoyment to the interest of his client. In the mastery, preparation and presentation of his cases, nothing escaped his attention. He was not content to have the “essential facts,” he mastered the minutest details, knowing that often these things have the controlling influence upon larger things. He was obsessed with the desire to present his client’s case properly; he felt he could not do justice to any but a worthy cause and the business he represented was selected in the light of this idea. The result was a general feeling that his acceptance of a cause was assurance that he believed in it, and that he would win.

His method of handling his cases was simplicity itself. It was first to get all the facts, every detail favorable or unfavorable, then carefully consider what was right, upon the facts ascertained, and then seek to find the law to justify and establish

the right. Any principle of law or decided case which pointed to a different conclusion from that determined to be just upon the facts considered was likely to be inapplicable in fact, and capable of being differentiated and shown inapplicable, because of distinguishing facts or circumstances. In his theory and practice, therefore, there were seldom or never "hard cases" due to "bad law" or any difference between the *right* conclusion and the *legal* conclusion upon any given state of facts. It will therefore be seen that he relied greatly upon a correct application of the broad, elemental, underlying principles of legal and equity jurisprudence, his wonderful comprehension of which was the more remarkable when it is remembered how very meagre were his educational advantages.

While not "a case lawyer" in the sense of relying upon decided cases in point to win, he knew the cases well, not only knew their doctrines, but their facts, and therein had many an adversary at his mercy, by reason of his ability upon the spur of the moment to point out the difference *in point of fact*, between the decided case and the one under argument. He had a remarkable memory,—it was remarked of him, probably hundreds of times, that "he never forgot anything that he had ever heard or read,"—and it was almost literally true.

He practiced his profession with a burning enthusiasm, and presented his client's cause with intense, earnest and persistent effort;—but he never permitted his zeal to carry him beyond the bounds of the strictest propriety. He was incapable of taking an unfair advantage, and was the fairest, most chivalrous adversary. He would have scorned any victory that was not fairly won.

He practiced his profession with a burning enthusiasm, and governing legal principles with the greatest lucidity, and enforced and supported his contentions by the aptest illustrations and comparisons possible to be conceived. His wit was sparkling, his irony incisive, his humor delicious, his denunciation withering, and his repartee superb. No attorney ever challenged him a second time, in arguments to an indulgence in this form of mental gymnastics,—the first experience sufficed.

The outstanding feature of his career as a lawyer was his

uniform success. He was not always successful,—no lawyer with so large a practice ever is,—but his percentages of successes ruled high, so high that the odds were regarded as always in favor of the side he represented.

He found great pleasure in the society of fellow members of the Bar. To the young members he was as a father or an older brother. He was absolutely free from any taint of envy or jealousy, and it was always his pleasure to aid the new members of the Bar to get forward and become established.

No one liked a good story better than he, and few had a greater stock at hand. During leisure hours he was usually the center of some group of interested listeners, at every County seat which he visited in the course of his practice.

If he was conspicuous as a lawyer, he was quite as successful as a farmer. He developed his farm with industry and ability, until it reached a state where it was considered one of the best farms in the County.

He spent most of his time upon his estate at Wilburn. Here he had his law office. Twelve miles from the County seat, remote from any city, in a sparsely settled community, in the middle of a large farm, was the office from which was conducted a volume of business greater than that transacted in representative offices, in many metropolitan centers. Here were his law books, his legal files, his entire equipment for the practice of the law. His office at the County seat, Lunenburg, was merely a place in which to transact business when at the County seat. It was often necessary for him to drive twelve miles to the County seat several times a week, but he preferred this to deserting his farm.

In the midst of a busy business life he ever found time and opportunity for deeds of kindness to the poor and needy and to aid and encourage benevolent and charitable enterprises generally.

He helped many, white and colored, to acquire and own their homes; he assisted numerous young persons to acquire an education,—indeed he was ever watchful to help someone; but it would be difficult to recount at length the character of his

benevolence, or to mention even in a general way the objects of his benefactions. Unostentatious in his methods, indefatigable in his industry, he seemed to sense, as if by instinct, the needs of others, and hastened to relieve the want before others were fairly aware of its existence. His advice and wise counsel served those who had no need of the material things of life. His broad-minded, charitable, sympathetic viewpoint invited the confidence of those troubled by the multiform perplexities of life. It was not surprising, therefore, to find upon his passing that the tribute of the throng, the rich and the poor, that stood at his bier to do homage to his memory, was often literally and in substance generally embodied in the simple statement: "He was the best friend I ever had."

The mainspring of all his actions was his deep religious conviction; his belief in the Bible and his acceptance of its teachings with all that this implies. He was a member of the Christian Church and held his membership always in Union Chapel Church, of which he was for many years,—from the time of reaching mature manhood until his death,—an officer.

Probably no one subject made so strong an appeal to his heart and his imagination as The Lost Cause. It was but natural that such should have been the case. He had engaged in the war and knew its cruelty and the suffering it imposed; he had lived under the impious régime inaugurated by the Federal Government in Virginia upon the fall of the Confederacy; he had seen his relatives, friends and fellow-countrymen the victims of poverty, want and injustice during the long night of reconstruction. He felt no regret that the Institution of Slavery was abolished, but he, in common with the rest of his fellow citizens, resented the unconstitutional, illegal, oppressive measures resorted to by the Federal authorities, and the brutal ungenerous acts of the victors.

He was deeply interested in the work of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and as a mark of appreciation of his aid the Lunenburg Chapter presented him with a gold medal, suitably inscribed.

Only a few months before he died he wrote a poem entitled

"The U. D. C.," which competent critics have regarded as possessing real poetical merit, and which beautifully expressed his estimate of the members of that splendid organization.

During the late World War,—in the last years of his life,—there was great demand for his assistance in promoting the success of various local war and patriotic activities, such as the Red Cross, and notwithstanding his declining health he always gladly responded with all the strength of his unfailing enthusiasm.

On November 28, 1877, he was united in marriage with Etta Wilburn Hardy (b. Nov. 24, 1859—d. March 19, 1916), daughter of John Covington Hardy (b. May 17, 1798—d. June 12, 1873), and his second wife Sarah Anne Boswell (b. Dec. 3, 1819—d. March 12, 1887). John Covington Hardy served in the Southern Campaign under General Andrew Jackson, though he was scarcely more than a boy. He was a son of Charles Hardy and Dorothy Bruce, and was descended from John and Olive Hardy, the founders of the Hardy family in America. John Hardy was living in Isle of Wight County, Virginia, in 1666. John Covington Hardy was a great-grandson of William Hardy of Lunenburg County, who died in 1791 and who served as a private soldier in the Revolutionary War in the Fifteenth Virginia Regiment. On his father's side, through his grandmother, Catherine Beauford, he was descended from Richard Beauford, who emigrated to America in 1635, and also from Richard Perrot (Parrot), Sr., who was Vestryman of Christ's Church, and Commissioner of Lancaster County, 1656, High Sheriff in 1657, and later Senior Justice of Middlesex County, Virginia. Sarah Anne Boswell, a daughter of John Iverson Boswell, Jr., and his first wife, Nancy D. Coleman, was descended from John and Phebe (Iverson) Boswell, her grandfather being John Iverson Boswell, Sr., (b. Apr. 5, 1761), who served in the Revolutionary War in the First Virginia Regiment.

There were born to Mr. and Mrs. Bell thirteen children, eleven of whom survived them,—two dying in infancy. These children were: Walton Elliott, Landon Covington, Isaac Washington, Berta Lou, Annie Wilburn, Haney Hardy, Etta Mabel, Myrtle Clyde, John Thomas, Willie Wingo, Mamie Lee, Bern-

ard Marshall and Anita Owen. Berta Lou and Mamie Lee died in infancy. Etta Mabel married Charles Luther Guthrie of Petersburg, and Myrtle Clyde married Edward H. Lane of Altavista, Virginia.

Soon after his marriage Mr. Bell purchased the ante-bellum homestead of John R. Garland, an estate which had been in the Garland family since Colonial days, and named it Wilburn in honor of his wife. Subsequently the post office established here was also named Wilburn, by which name the office is still known though it is no longer maintained upon the estate which gave it its name.

Mrs. Bell was a woman possessed of many beautiful traits of Christian character, was a devoted wife and mother, an accomplished housekeeper and a charming hostess.

The cordiality and warmth of the reception given those entering this home, and the bountiful hospitality dispensed, assure that recollections of Wilburn will linger long in the memories of those who came under the magic influence of its hospitable charm.